Place of Error Correction in English Language Teaching

Ali Akbar Khansir and Farhad Pakdel

Ali Akbar Khansir, Bushehr University of Medical Sciences, Iran. (e-mail: ahmad_2004_bu@yahoo.com)

Farhad Pakdel, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Iran. (e-mail: ffpakdel@yahoo.com)

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Abstract

This review paper is intended to discuss the function, objective and aim of correction as a language strategy in English language learning. In reality, correction is termed as feedback by teachers. Feedback is useful where there is a lack of knowledge, especially the failure of students to use language correctly. Error correction is not an essay and it is should be practiced as instructed by the teacher in a language teaching setting. Error correction is a way to develop competence of language learners in a second or foreign language. It can be used in order to attain conscious knowledge of a second or foreign language, and in learning the language's rules. What is important is that errors in language speech and writing are viewed as having detrimental effects when acquiring a second or foreign language.

Introduction

Before discussing about error correction in English language teaching, let us discuss errors. We discuss briefly a comprehensive picture of the state of the art of errors in language teaching. Khansir (2012) mentioned that error analysis emerged as a reaction to contrastive analysis theory which considered native language interference as the major source of errors in second language learning. Corder (1967) proposed a hypothesis that errors are evidence of learner's strategies of acquiring the language rather than signs of inhibition or interference of persistent old habits (Khansir, 2010). Corder (1973) argued that studying student's errors also has immediate practical applications for foreign language teachers: Errors provide feedback; they tell the teachers something about the effectiveness of his teaching materials and his teaching techniques, and show him what parts of the syllabus he has been following have been inadequately learned or taught and need further attention. They enable him to decide whether he must devote more time to the item he has been working on. This is the day-to-day value of errors. But in terms of broader planning and with a new group of learners they provide the information for designing a remedial syllabus or a programme of re-teaching (Corder, 1973, p. 262, as cited in Hendrickson, 1981, p. 4). According to the state of the art of errors in language teaching, Khansir (2010) added that it is important for teachers to be aware of the basic position that errors, as a natural and indispensable part of the learning process, should neither be tolerated nor corrected excessively. Therefore, the main objective of L2 teaching is to develop the ability in the learner to communicate in the target language. What is certain, however, is that errors are an integral part of learning a second/foreign language, or is a natural part of the learner's gradual movement toward the development of communicative competence, and he/she should be allowed to make certain types of errors which do not greatly affect their communication. This paragraph indicates that errors are a part of learner's language development, a sign of the learner's learning. What is important is that errors can be guided in order to help the students, language teachers, syllabus designers in acquiring second language acquisition. Pakdel and Khansir (2017) said that "error analysis is one of the major important topics of Applied Linguistics can be used in order to promote and improve language teaching strategies in ELT classroom" (p. 115). What is remarkable in error analysis is that the teachers should be familiar with the difference between the first and the target language (Khansir, Ahrami, & Hajivandi, 2013).

Contrastive approach is an approach to developing the issue of error correction in language teaching. In the development of language teaching, particularly in the teaching and learning of a second or foreign language, there are many theories. One such theory supported by applied linguistics is contrastive analysis, which focusses on error correction and is supported by behavioristic theory states that errors are a symptom of ineffective teaching or as evidence of failure. Based on this theory, errors became like a sin; something to be avoided. Over time, many great scholars believed that when teaching and learning a target language, a systematic comparison should be made between the mother tongue of the learner and the target language, and that the outcome would be quite helpful to both teachers and learners. Thus, this idea brought about contrastive analysis in language teaching. Farhady and Delshad (2007) argued that "contrastive analysis (CA) can be defined as a systematic comparison and contrast between two languages in order to find the existing similarities and differences between them" (p. 53). In addition, based on this approach, the

errors of a target language committed by the language learner are only due to the interference of their mother tongue, otherwise known as interlingual errors.

In this paragraph, we briefly discuss error correction and feedback in language learning and teaching. One of the reasons is that errors made in the target language is said to relate to the competence of the language learner. Therefore, it is important for language teachers to know why their students make errors in the target language in order that the language teachers may attack errors at their root cause and address them before they are even made. Bose (2005) mentioned that "the reasons for making errors in SL are generally the same for all learners of English" (p. 66). He added that it would be easier to identify the errors and remedy them if the mother tongue is the same, because one of the sources of errors in English is the interference of the mother tongue. What is important in error correction is that all these errors do not necessarily require the same remedial treatment, because some of the learner's errors may be due to carelessness or (i.e., mistakes), whilst others are more serious and may be due to incompetence of the learner (i.e., errors). Ur (1996) argued that "in the context of teaching in general, feedback is information that is given to the learner about his or her performance of a learning task, usually with the objective of improving this performance" (p. 242). Thus, feedback can be distinguishable components based on assessment and correction. Ur (1996) added that in assessment, the learner is simply informed as to how well or badly they have performed. However, in a correction component, some specific information is provided on certain aspects of the learner's performance: through explanation, or provision of better or other alternatives, or through elicitation of these from the learner. Johnson and Johnson (1999) argued that "error correction is a form of feedback, and there is a wide literature on the general topic of feedback" (p. 115). However, Long (1977) presented a distinction between feedback and correction. According to his study, feedback should be used in the case of teachers' attempts to supply learners with information about the correctness of their productions, while correction should be used based on the outcome of feedback.

Before leaving the introduction of this paper, a review of language acquisition and learning is needed because this paper focuses on error correction and feedback in learning a target language (English). According to Krashen (1987), there are two main ways to develop linguistic knowledge; acquisition and learning. Acquisition is a subconscious process similar to the way in which children develop their native language; whereas learning is a conscious process of obtaining knowledge of a second language (Krashen, 1987). Ziahosseiny (2009) added that in the learning process, error detection and correction are central, as is the case in most classroom settings where formal rules provide the basis for language instruction. Khansir (2014a) argued that "the process of language acquisition is the same as the process of acquisition of the first language, whereas, learning is conscious process and it used in the formal situations by teachers" (p. 141). He added that the fundamental distinction is between learning and acquisition. Acquisition in this theory occurs not consciously, and it does not occur in formal situations or through formal grammatical rules of language.

Error Correction

The issue of error correction in a target language has been discussed considerably over recent years. In audio-lingualism, errors of language learners were considered as sins and the language learners were not allowed to commit errors whilst learning. However, in error approach, language research has shown that language learners' errors are very useful as a

strategy for learning a language. The learners' errors are recognized as an integral part of learning a target language. In fact, this approach has rejected error correction completely. This approach does not mean that errors should be left uncorrected, but that they should be corrected tactfully. The best strategy to correct language learners' errors is to let the students correct their own errors with their teacher's help. Another strategy is to let one of the students in a classroom correct his/her errors; else, we request the classroom teacher to correct students' errors in a target language. What is very important is that if the aim of error correction is to learn target language, or when it is necessary in teaching a second or a foreign language, or when it impairs communication in the target language, then errors should be corrected. Most language researchers believed that error correction can be used as a form of feedback. Correction is viewed as feedback on errors. Murphy (1986) confirmed correction as feedback and argued that correction is a form of feedback to learners with regards to their use of the language. Essentially it is neutral and may describe success or failure; because language in use exploits both form and function. It may be concerned with accuracy or fluency. Giving correction, the teacher attempts to help and improve learning; indeed, learners are reported to want correction and find it useful. Following Edge's discussion on error correction, he then found correction to be a reminder, informational, and helpful through providing feedback and he discussed the function, objective and the aim of correction in language learning and reported that "correction is a way of reminding students of the forms of standard English. It should not be a kind of criticism or punishment" (1989, p. 20). "Think of correction as a way of giving information, or feedback, to your students, just when it will support their learning" (1989, p. 17). "Correction should not mean insisting on everything being absolutely correct. Correction means helping students to become more accurate in their use of language" (1989, p. 33). "Correctness means helping people express themselves more accurately" (1989, p. 59). Mishra (2005) mentioned that correction in traditional practice is essentially a post-production exercise by the teacher in the school language situation, interim to the acts of production and re-writing or not re-writing. However, correction is not essay work, when learners' errors require treatment; the errors are considered by the teacher in order to correct them. Mishra (2005) dealt with errors correction, especially in writing, as a complex work and as difficult a task as that of writing itself – involving understanding, thinking, logical ordering, and factual structuring etc. He added that correction in its process examines the writing and attempts at hinting at effective ways of rehabilitating originally intended meaning of the pre-writing stage through rewriting, or at directly rewriting the writing to make it more meaning-focused. Doff (1990), in his study of error correction, noted that some aims of his study could help teachers develop sensitivity in correcting errors, which are concerned with the following techniques:

- To make teachers more aware of the significance of learners' errors.
- To help teachers develop positive strategies of error correction.
- To show teachers a range of techniques for correcting oral and written errors.

He added that the aims of this study would encourage the teachers to develop a positive attitude towards their students' errors and suggested ways of correcting errors that will help, rather than hinder, the learning process. Mackey (1967) emphasized the importance of error perception and correction. He pointed out various techniques for correcting errors in his study as follows:

"Techniques of correcting are some of the most important of classroom techniques. The teacher may first try to diagnose the cause of the error. The error may be due to a transfer from the native language, an analogy with something correctly learnt in the foreign language, a wild guess, vagueness in remembering the right form or general lack of accuracy and language skill….In the correction of errors there are three possibilities for the learners; he may hear his error and correct it; he may hear it and not correct it; and he may neither hear it nor correct it. (1967, p. 369)"

As mentioned above, finally, Hormer (1988) reported suggestions regarding the correction of language errors as follows:

- Correct the output of the students if it appears to have some effect.
- Do not correct overtly, if the learner cannot self-correct, try other members of the class.
- Do not try to correct everything. Students are learning the language to be able to communicate with the outside world. So the primary concern is with errors which render communication difficult.

With regard to the error correction, Keshavarz is one of a number of language scholars who suggested that an approach used in teaching composition related to error correction was found to be effective, and that is to write the common errors on the board and explain them to the class as a whole. Then, students were asked to examine their compositions and try to discover their own errors. The discovery procedure was followed by classroom exercises on the point(s) with which the students experienced problems (Keshavarz, 1994). Based on the study of Khansir and Hozhabri (2014), "error correction can be used as an effective method to promote EFL participants' writing achievement in order to help the participants become active and independent students in their performances in writing EFL classroom" (p. 196). It is important to understand is that error correction is considered to be one of the important techniques of error approach, which is also considered as one of the most important aspects of applied linguistics with considerable influence over learning and teaching in the English language.

Related Terms of Error Correction

For correction of language learner's errors different terms such as Repair, Reconstruction and Reformulation are needed. In dealing with the question of repair of errors, Richards, Platt, and Platt (1992) mentioned that it was "a term for ways in which errors, unintended forms, or misunderstandings are corrected by speakers or others during conversation" (p. 314). Johnson and Johnson (1999) added that "repair may focus on either meaning or form, and operate at any level: phoneme, morpheme, word, phrase, clause, sentence, or discourse" (p. 274). "Although techniques of repair are language –specific and an important part of strategic competence, they have received little attention in language teaching" (p. xx). Mishra (2005) argued that repair is a broader term that includes correction which refers only to the removal of errors. However, repair is known as the replacement of errors in language that is made by the speaker of a language. There are two types of repairs: a self-repair (correction of the speaker's own utterances); and other repair (correction of the interlocutor). The second related term of error correction is Reconstruction. Johnson (1988) argued that,

"In reconstruction, errors and mistakes are simply corrected. The results will be sentences free from gross malformations, but ones which may not remotely resemble sentences a native speaker would produce to express the same content because reconstruction focuses on errors and mistakes, it may well provide the learner with information on where he or she went wrong. (Johnson, 1988, p. 92, as cited in Mishra, 2005). The last part of this category is Reformulation. Based on Johnson study, "reformulation provides a model of what the behavior should look like; and though its clearest use is for writing. There is no reason why spoken language should not be reformulated" (Johnson, 1988, p. 92)."

Error and Mistakes

There has been a great deal of discussion in language teaching over errors and related terms of errors among language scholars in recent years. However, every learner makes mistakes, even when speaking his mother tongue. Khansir (2010) mentioned that for a foreign language learner who knows his target language quite well, when he makes mistakes, he has the ability to recognize and to correct them, but sometimes he does not recognize his mistakes. Mistakes are quite different from errors. Error is defined as a lack of a leaner's knowledge of the language which he uses. Corder (1967), Duskova (1969), and Richards (1971) suggested a distinction between errors at the level of performance from errors at the level of competence. They mentioned that mistakes are errors of performance and unsystematic. They are potentially correctible by their author or speaker. Whereas, errors of competence are errors which reveal the underlying knowledge of the language and they are systematic and part of the transitional competence of the learner. Corder (1973) distinguished between "lapses," "mistakes" and "errors." According to him, errors are divided into two categories: first is the performance category which is comprised of "lapses" and mistakes; and the second is the competence category which is comprised of "errors." Slips of the tongue, false starts, confusion of structures etc., are termed "lapses." In addition to the fact that errors differ from lapses and mistakes in that they are breaches of the code, that is, they offend the grammatical rules of the language and result in "ungrammatical" and "unacceptable" utterances; errors occur because the learner has not internalized the grammar of the second language in the way that it is required.

Review of Error Correction

Let us begin this part of this paper by briefly clarifying the fundamental questions about error correction and then review the literature that addresses them. A question arises as to why should foreign language learner's errors be corrected? However, we recognize that error correction is one of the basic strategies in learning and teaching a foreign or second language in the classroom. Mishra (2005) mentioned that in his study, he found that 100% of the teachers answered positively about the essentialness of correction. He added that the problem is that teachers do not know effective methods of correction. Krashen (1987) argued that based on the theory of second language acquisition, it effects learned competence by informing the learner that his or her current version of a conscious rule is wrong. Thus, second language acquisition theory implies that when the goal is learning, errors should indeed be corrected (but not all times, and not all rules, even if the goal is learning). Based on the idea of Hendrickson (1978) in the area of error correction, it was argued that students may not on their own be able to correct their own errors, and that correction should come as a teaching aid. Thus, in 1986, Sheorey was one of the research

scholars who worked on the perception of errors of native speakers and non-native speakers of the English language among teachers of ESL, and mentioned that error correction in ESL cases can be liberally applied in order to benefit students. Richards (1974) said that error correction in English second language contexts should be based on a liberal approach. What is important is that in learning a target language, the role of students should not be ignored in error correction and opportunity given to teachers to make decisions and to use the error correction liberally.

One of the common strategies in error correction of a target language can be the role of the teacher or student. The role of the teacher in error correction is a traditional approach and stretches back to the time of the audiolingual approach. At that time, teachers were responsible for correcting all errors of their students, and then the result of this theory bore a new approach in applied linguistics called contrastive approach. It assumed that the mother tongue interference from a students' first language was the cause of errors in their target language. Hendrickson (1981) argued that it was believed that if a teacher had a systematic knowledge of the differences between the two languages, he could begin developing appropriate instructional techniques and materials that would help students avoid producing errors. Based the role of the teacher in error correction, Allwright (1975) mentioned that teacher correction could be effective on the grounds of illogicality, inconsistency and unproductiveness. Corder, in 1973 and as the father of error analysis, argued that the role of teachers in error correction should provide data and examples, and where necessary to offer explanations and descriptions and more importantly, verification of the teacher's hypothesis about the target language.

We now turn to the student and his role in error correction. Ellis (1991) argued that "the teacher has a traditional right to provide learners with feedback regarding the correctness or appropriateness of their responses" (p. 70). The role of student as the second angle of language error correction is often very important. In the language classroom, what is very important is that the teacher should give opportunity to learners to correct their own errors. Khansir (2014b) argued that it is important that English teachers give more opportunities to learners in the classroom in order to practice their lessons and that the teacher tries to push students in the right direction several times so as to focus on their activities. Mishra (2005) said that sharing the learning experience with students is advocated by modern educational psychology. He added that this sharing can help the students through twofold purposes. Firstly, this helps to test the level of language knowledge of the students; and secondly, it makes some exchange and communication between the teacher and the students possible. Thus, correction in this sharing implies that students' themselves take on the job of their error correction. Sharing pushes the students toward peer correction, and group correction can be used as steps leading to students' self-correction. This means that we can reach the highest purpose of all correction efforts and it may be the case that the students may directly improve and promote their language acquisition. In this case, the role of teacher can be as guide and he forms a group of language learners and the group is assigned to correct the errors selected. Edge (1989) suggested the four items based on peer-correction which can be of advantage to learners as follows:

- Peer correction helps in thinking about the language when two learners are actively engaged in deciding which is the best form of language. Listening to others' ideas helps in testing one's own knowledge.

- When the teacher engages learners in correcting each other's mistakes, he gets a good opportunity to listen to the discussion and ascertain how far learners have internalized the grammatical rules.
- Error correction helps learners to be less dependent on their teachers and rely more on their colleagues.
- The habit of doing every little thing in the class in pairs and groups without hurting each other's feeling convinces them that they can learn from each other.

However, we conclude that correction as one of language learning strategies depends on time, practice, interest, involvement of both teacher and learner in learning a target language. Error correction has its total success when the language learners making the errors are able to correct them alone (self-correction). Another item in this discussion is when learner errors should be corrected. In this discussion, we have still to focus on the teacher as one of the angles of language learning strategies in ELT setting. If a teacher is able to discover causes of a student's error in the four language skills (writing, speaking, reading, listening), he can push the student towards error correction, plans for language learning through error correction strategies and shows the causes of those errors to the student. Now, we follow the issue of error correction in this field based the suggestion of Krashen (1987), who mentioned that,

"The implications of second language acquisition theory are similar. If error correction aims at learning, it is logical to suppose that the conditions for error correction should be identical to the conditions for utilizing learning –we should focus our students on form, and correct their errors, only when they have time and when such diversion of attention does not interfere with communication. (1987, p. 117)"

However, error correction should be applied in order to help the language learner know how much they have learned, as well as how much remains to be learned. Hendrickson (1981) mentioned that based on the empirical evidence, and when to correct second language errors, teachers are argued to tolerate a greater degree of errors in their students' speech and writing. Another item is very necessary in this paper is that which learner errors should be corrected, and which should not? One of the important aims of error correction is to interpret the results of the method of language teaching employed, and to tell us the kinds of errors committed by the students. Evidence shows that a greater number of errors occur in ELT classrooms; however, error correction is needed as part of a more effective language teaching strategy, along with a good technique by teachers in the ELT classroom. A language teacher should focus on the frequency of errors committed by students in learning the English language. Johasson, in his 1973 study, argued that errors involving general grammatical rules are more deserving of attention than errors involving lexical exceptions. Hendrickson (1981) suggested that errors that impair communication significantly are those that have highly stigmatic effects on the listener or reader, and that occur very frequently in sentences' speech or writing. Based on the hypotheses of Hendrickson in the field of error correction, Krashen (1987) mentioned the following hypotheses:

- Global errors should be corrected, because they interfere with communication or impede the intelligibility of a language. This type of error deserves top priority in correction.

- Errors that are the most stigmatized, that cause the most unfavorable reactions; they are the most important to correct.
- Errors that occur most frequently should be given top priority.

In this paragraph, we discuss another item related to error correction, and that is how should errors be corrected? One of the learning strategies related to error correction is where the teacher corrects all learners' errors in the ELT classroom. Many great scholars have considered the issue of error correction in language learners, such as Cohen and Robbins (1976) who argued that students' who had error correction applied in their compositions showed no significant effect on error reduction, and that it was an issue whereby the teachers had corrected the compositions inconsistently. Therefore, they mentioned that a systematic approach to error correction would be more effective than random corrective actions. Krashen (1987) argued that the following items could be positive in error correction:

- Errors corrected are limited to learnable and portable rules.
- Errors are corrected under conditions that allow Monitor use. This will give the learner time to reconsider the rule that was violated.
- Measures evaluating the efficacy of error correction are administered under conditions that allow Monitor use, to allow the learners time to refer to his or her conscious knowledge.
- Subjects used as known to be Monitor –users (i.e. they are not under-users of the Monitor). (p. 119)

Wingfield (1975) said that the following five techniques are necessary for correcting learners written errors,

- The teacher gives sufficient clues to enable self-correction to be made;
- The teacher corrects the script;
- The teacher deals with errors through marginal comments and footnotes;
- The teacher explains orally to individual students;
- The teacher uses the error as an illustration for a class explanation. (p. 311)

What is very important to understand is that procedures of error correction include both teacher correction and student correction. Sometimes, error correction has been applied based on direct correction, Krashen (1987) mentioned that "some research shows that direct correction is not particularly effective; students who have had direct correction of their oral and written output in instructional programs did not produce fewer errors" (p. 118). Sometimes, error correction has been done based on inductive approach. Khansir and Pakdel (2016) said that "inductive approach to the teaching grammar is used based on this technique: grammar rules are not presented to the learners first. Language rules are induced from carefully graded exposure to and practice with examples in situations and substitution tables" (p. 145).

Conclusion

The discussion of the error correction of English language errors is still alive and plays a vital role in English language learning in the EFL classroom for foreign and second language settings. In conclusion, this paper has shown that error correction of foreign or second

language learners depends on both teachers and students. Thus, we conclude that teachers can be helpful to students as a guide in improving the ability of the students to correct written or spoken English errors in the ELT classroom. Hendrickson (1981) concluded that,

"It may be more helpful for students and more efficient for teachers to correct selective written errors by using a combination of direct and indirect techniques depending upon the types and frequencies of errors that a student produces, and according to his or her language proficiency. (p. 37)"

In an investigation dealing with the error treatment, Chaudron (1977) differentiated between types of treatment: a) Treatment that results in the learners' autonomous ability to correct herself on an item; b) Treatment that results in the elicitation of a correct response from the learner; c) Any reaction by the teacher that clearly transforms disapprovingly refers to or demands improvement; and, d) Positive or negative reinforcement involving expressions of approval or disapproval (Ellis, 1991, p. 71).

Notes

Corresponding author: ALI AKBAR KHANSIR

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